

CONSUMER ETHNOCENTRISM: THE RELATIONSHIP WITH DOMESTIC PRODUCTS EVALUATION AND BUYING PREFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is one ASEAN developing country, which has attracted the attention of foreign investors and marketers. ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which was realized in 2003, brings foreign products to Malaysian consumers with more affordable deals. The issue of globalisation that has been debated around the world could also carry the same impact or even more towards local products. One party that plays a major role in these issues is the Malaysian consumer. Do they think domestic products are of good quality? Are they willing to buy domestic products? These are the questions that should be answered in determining the future of domestic products. Consumer ethnocentrism is a marketing concept/construct that measures consumers' prejudice against imports. Consumers who score high on consumer ethnocentrism overestimate domestic products' and underestimate imports. The objective of this study is to investigate whether consumer ethnocentrism has an impact on Malaysian consumers buying preferences and domestic products' evaluations. Findings from this study showed that more than 80% of the respondents were highly ethnocentric consumers. Results also showed that consumer ethnocentrism has a significant relationship to buying preferences and domestic products' evaluations. Despite positive evaluation on domestic products' evaluation, preferences to buy domestic products found to be varied across types of products. The sample most preferred to buy domestic food products and rated no preference to domestic cars and personal computers. The study also found that demographic variables of age, gender, income and education have no significant relationship with consumer ethnocentrism. The implications of the study and future research areas are also discussed.

Keywords: consumer ethnocentrism, buying preferences, product evaluation, international marketing.

ABSTRAK

Malaysia adalah salah sebuah negara membangun ASEAN yang telah berjaya menarik perhatian pelabur dan pedagang luar negara. Kawasan Perdagangan Bebas ASEAN (AFTA) yang dilaksanakan pada tahun 2003 telah membawa produk luar kepada pengguna Malaysia pada harga yang mampu dibeli. Isu globalisasi yang hangat diperdebatkan di seluruh dunia mungkin memberi impak kepada produk tempatan. Pihak yang memainkan peranan utama dalam isu ini ialah pengguna Malaysia. Adakah pengguna berpandangan barangan tempatan berkualiti? Adakah mereka bersedia untuk membeli produk tempatan? Inilah persoalan yang perlu dijawab dalam penentuan masa depan produk tempatan. Etnosentrisme Pengguna (EP) adalah satu konsep/konstruk pemasaran yang mengukur prejudis pengguna terhadap barangan import. Pengguna yang mendapat skor EP tinggi akan terlebih anggar produk tempatan dan terkurang anggar produk import. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji sama ada EP mempunyai impak ke atas keutamaan dan penilaian pengguna Malaysia. Hasil kajian menunjukkan lebih 80% responden adalah pengguna yang mempunyai tahap EP yang tinggi. Keputusan kajian juga menunjukkan EP mempunyai hubungan signifikan terhadap keutamaan pembelian dan penilaian produk tempatan. Selain daripada penilaian positif ke atas produk tempatan, keutamaan pembelian produk tempatan adalah berbeza mengikut jenis produk. Sampel kajian menunjukkan pengguna memberi keutamaan pembelian terhadap produk makanan tempatan dan meletakkan tiada keutamaan terhadap produk kereta dan komputer tempatan. Kajian juga mendapati pemboleh ubah demografi seperti umur, jantina, pendapatan dan pendidikan tidak mempunyai hubungan signifikan dengan EP. Implikasi kajian dan penyelidikan masa depan juga dibincangkan.

Kata kunci: etnosentrisme pengguna, keutamaan pembelian, penilaian produk, pemasaran antarabangsa.

INTRODUCTION

Success of markets mostly depend on their ability to satisfy their customers in term of delivering products/services values. However, international business requires more than just that. There are various factors contributing to international business success and this paper will discuss one of it that is consumer ethnocentrism (CE). This concept can help marketers to answer to questions such as what are consumer attitudes toward imports and do consumers have the tendency to buy only domestic products.

CE is a concept introduced by Shimp and Sharma (1987). This concept has been derived from the original concept of ethnocentrism, which

introduced by Sumner (1906). CE is a concept/construct from marketing which can explain consumer behaviour towards imports. Basically, it is a reflection of an individual's prejudice of imports. The original concept introduced by Sumner is the general concept of ethnocentrism, which is used to distinguish between ingroups (those groups with which an individual identifies) and outgroups (those regarded as antithetical to the groups).

Previous researches showed that CE levels among consumers can differ across countries (i.e. Shin, 1993; Martinez, Zapata & Garcia, 2000; Watson and Wright, 2000) which directly imply that consumer readiness to accept imports varies among consumers and markets. For example, Good and Huddleston (1995) have reported that there was a significant difference in the level of CE between Polish and Russian consumers, with Polish consumers being more ethnocentric than Russian consumers. Therefore, it is very important for international marketers to have knowledge of CE. CE level can influence the success of marketers' market development, market penetration and also product positioning in a market.

CONSUMER ETHNOCENTRISM

The original concept of ethnocentrism is rooted from the fields of study of sociology and psychology which was introduced by Sumner in 1906. This original concept of ethnocentrism has become a psychosocial construct which represents the tendency of individuals to view their own group as omnipotent, to view other groups from their own perspectives, and to reject culturally dissimilar ideas while blindly accepting culturally similar ideas and people (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Before the development of CE, ethnocentrism had received recognition to be applicable to consumer behaviour (Martinez *et al.*, 2000) but still as a sociology concept instead of a marketing concept as CE.

Shimp and Sharma (1987) introduced the phrase 'consumer ethnocentric tendencies' to represent the beliefs held by American consumers about the appropriateness and the morality of purchasing foreign-made products. They proposed CE as a construct that may partially explain why consumers evaluate domestic products more favourably (Marcoux, Sebastian, Pierre & Emmanuel, 1997; Shin, 1993) than foreign goods. Although introduced in the context of American consumers, the concept (and its measure) does not appear to be culturally bound (Netemeyer, Durvasula & Lichtenstein, 1991).

Consumer ethnocentrism can also be referred to the concept of 'economic nationalism' or 'national loyalty' in behavioural study (Bruning, 1997). It is the belief that purchasing imported products is wrong because it hurts the domestic economy and one's fellow citizens. Consumer ethnocentricity evolves from the love and concern for one's own country and the fear of losing control of one's economic interests as the result of the harmful effects that imported products may bring to oneself and countrymen. This implies the intention or willingness not to purchase foreign products. Furthermore, the purchase of foreign products is not only an economic issue, but also more importantly, a moral problem. This is because morality causes consumers to purchase domestic products even though in some cases the quality is below that of imports (Watson & Wright, 2000). In addition to this, CE also shows a reflection of a personal level of prejudice against imports. In other words, highly ethnocentric consumers overestimate domestic products, underestimate imported products and have a preference and moral obligation to buy domestic products (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). This is proved by four independent studies conducted by Shimp and Sharma (1987) where the scale was shown to be correlated to consumers' intent to purchase domestic products. The four independent studies were meant to assess the reliability and construct validity of the 17-item CETSCALE. The studies were termed "four-areas study" namely "national consumer good study", "Carolinas study" and the "crafted with pride study". The studies used different samples from four areas which were Detroit, Denver, Los Angeles and Carolina.

Research has also proved that there is relationship between CE and consumer purchase decision or product selection (Lundstrom, Lee & White, 1998). In the interest of international business specifically, there is strong evidence that CE is more dominant than traditional marketing strategy in import buying decisions (Herche, 1994). Moreover, CE also seems to have various effects across types of products. Herche (1992) found that CE is a better predictor of import buying behaviour than demographic variables for US owners of automobiles and personal computers. In reverse, a study of Russian and Polish consumers by Good and Huddleston (1995) found that there was no significant relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and purchase intent for apparel products from different countries. In the case of air-carrier, Bruning (1997) reported that consumers' preference for local carriers is not equally strong across travellers segments. In addition, consumer perceived necessity of products also affects product evaluation (Huddleston, Good & Stoel, 2001). However, previous literature suggests that CE's predictive ability of buying preferences and products evaluation varies from country to country.

DEMOGRAPHICS FACTORS

Researches have proved that demographics determine the consumer's lifestyle and purchase pattern. Mager and Hulpke (1990) found that demographics (income, education, occupation and family background) determine the exposure to, and thus the purchase of expensive goods. Demographics have also played a great role in the consumption of foreign-made products. The consumers' demographics such as age, gender, education and income have proven to be related to the ethno-national identity. However, the effects of each factor on ethnocentricity vary across countries. For example, more ethnocentric Polish consumers are older, female, less educated and have lower income than less ethnocentric consumers; as for Russians, the only variable that has an impact on CE is education. Russians who are more ethnocentric are less educated (Good & Huddleston, 1995).

Age

The age factor did not show a consistent influence on CE across countries. When age has a significant influence on CE, usually it is a positive relationship between age and CE (Good & Huddleston, 1995; Caruana & Magri, 1996). In other words, consumer ethnocentricity increases with age factor. Where, the higher the age factor, the higher the level of ethnocentrism.

Furthermore, it is generally accepted that the younger consumers are not bound by personal experience and the historical past and, thus, have less restrictions and limitations as to the choice of products. Shin (1993) shows that older consumers favour domestic products more, tend to be more conservative and, conversely, younger consumers are found to favour imported products.

Gender

Females are more conservative, more economists, more patriotic and more concerned about preserving social harmony and promoting positive feelings among group members (Shin, 1993). Thus, females were found to be more ethnocentric than males (Good & Huddleston, 1995; Kucukemiroglu, 1999). However, there are also cases where gender (and also marital status) does not appear to have an effect on CE (Caruana & Magri, 1996).

A study by Shin (1993) also found that the correlation between gender and consumer ethnocentricity were not significant among their Korean sample compared to the United States and Turkey samples. These seem-

ingly contradictory findings might be due to the effect of education, interaction between gender and other demographics variables or cultural differences between Korea and United States (Shin, 1993).

Education

Education has a negative relationship with CE. The higher the level of education, the lower the ethnocentricity (Caruana & Magri, 1996). A study on the impact of lifestyle on CE by Kucukemiroglu (1999) in a Turkish sample also revealed the same result.

The more educated tend to be less conservative and less likely to have pride in their own country (Shin, 1993). This might be the reason why education level was found to be negatively related to CE. For certain countries like Russia, education is the only demographic factor that has a significant relationship with CE and yet the relationship is still negative (Good & Huddleston, 1995). However, Balabanis, Diamantopoulos, Mueller and Melewar (2001) found that education is not a significant predictor of CE in both the Turkish and Czech samples.

Income

In general, we would expect consumers with higher incomes and education to be more cosmopolitan and thus less ethnocentric in their consumption. This fact proved to be true as many studies reported a significant and positive relationship between income and CE (Sharma & Shimp, 1995; Balabanis *et al.*, 2001; Caruana & Magri, 1996). Consumers with higher incomes can afford to travel abroad and try more different products. This may result in lower levels of CE and more openness to foreign products (Sharma & Shimp, 1995). Research in country image has supported the positive correlation between higher income and the tendency to evaluate foreign products more favourably (Shin, 1993). However, Balabanis *et al.* (2001) reported negative relationship between income and CE in a Czech sample. But overall, there seems to be more support to the idea that consumers with higher incomes show higher consumer ethnocentricity and vice versa.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is:

1. to investigate whether ethnocentric tendencies have an impact

- on Malaysian consumers' domestic product evaluations.
2. to investigate whether ethnocentric tendencies influence Malaysian consumers' buying preferences.
 3. to examine whether there will be a relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and age, gender, education and income.

Based on the literature, below are the hypotheses tested in this study.

- H1:** There is a relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and domestic product evaluations.
- H2:** There is a relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and buying preferences.
- H3:** There is a relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and age, gender, income and education.

METHODOLOGY

This study intends to investigate if CE affects Malaysian consumers' evaluation on domestic products and their buying preferences (Figure 1). Buying preferences refers to consumer preferences whether to buy domestic or imported products.

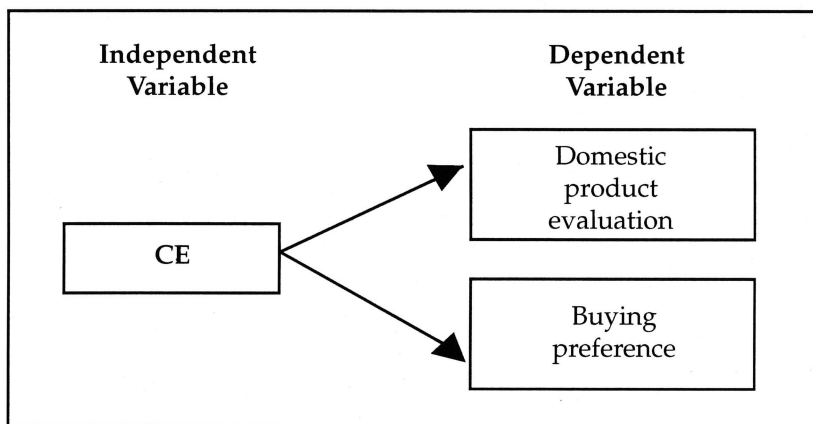


Figure 1
Theoretical Framework

Sample and Data Collection

The self-administered questionnaires were distributed throughout Malaysia via students as intermediates. The students' parents were asked to fill the questionnaires and return them through mail with

stamped self-addressed envelopes. Out of 350 questionnaires, only 54% were returned and were usable for data analysis.

Instrument

The instrument is divided into four sections. The sections consist of the following measurements; ethnocentrism scale (CETSCALE), domestic product evaluation, buying preferences and demographic questions. Domestic product evaluation was rated on a semantic differential scale with five semantic spaces. The evaluations were done on four aspects of a product; quality, reliability, value for money and technological advancement. A five point Likert scale was used to measure buying preferences. The validity and reliability of the 17 items of the CETSCALE has been tested across many countries and proved to be applicable to measure CE (Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Davis, Douglas & Silk, 1981; Netemeyer, Durvasula & Lichtenstein, 1991).

Selection of Products

The products used to investigate consumers' buying preferences were chosen based on previous researches that also intended to examine buying preferences and product evaluations (Huddleston *et al.*, 2001; Rawwas, Rajendran & Wuehrer, 1996).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Internal consistency reliability for CETSCALE as computed by Cronbach's alpha was 0.89. Nomological validity tests have also been done to test the application ability of the scale in Malaysia. The first test was between the CETSCALE and general attitude towards buying imports, which yielded a significant and positive relationship ($r=0.501$, $p=0.05$). The second test was between the CETSCALE and general attitude towards buying domestic products also showed a significant result but with negative relationship ($r=-0.183$, $p=0.05$). Both tests proved the existence of nomological validity (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1991; Shimp & Sharma, 1987), which means CETSCALE can be applied in the local context.

The sample consisted of 52.9 per cent males and 47.1 per cent females (Table 1). Over 40 per cent of the sample was in the age group 20-29, another 42.3 per cent were between 30-49, about 10 per cent aged 50 and above, and only 2-3 per cent aged below 20. Over 80 per cent of the sample had more than secondary school qualification (SPM) with 40 per cent having Diploma or certificate, about 30 per cent had a first

degree level and 19 per cent had postgraduate qualification. Only 3 per cent did not finish secondary school. Half of the sample earned between RM 1001- RM 2500. The second majority that was about 23 per cent of the sample earned between RM 501 – RM 1000. About 12 per cent earned below RM 500 and another 14 per cent earned more than RM 2501.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics and CE Level

Demographic variables	n (%)	Low CE ^a (%)	High CE ^a (%)
Gender			
Male	100(53)	17 (57)	83 (52)
Female	89(47)	13 (43)	76 (48)
Age			
Below 20	5 (3)	-	5 (3)
20 – 29	85 (45)	15 (50)	70 (44)
30 – 39	39 (21)	5 (17)	34 (21)
40 – 49	41 (22)	3 (10)	38 (24)
50 and above	19 (10)	7 (23)	12 (8)
Education			
LCE	6 (3)	-	6 (4)
MCE	13 (7)	2 (7)	11 (7)
Diploma/certificate	78 (40)	10 (33)	68 (43)
Graduate	56 (30)	10 (33)	46 (29)
Postgraduate/doctorate	36 (19)	8 (27)	28 (18)
Income			
RM 500 and below	22 (12)	1 (3)	21 (14)
RM 501 – RM 1000	43 (23)	7 (23)	36 (23)
RM 1001 – RM 2500	94 (51)	14 (47)	80 (52)
RM 2501 – RM 3500	17 (10)	6 (20)	11 (7)
RM 3501 and above	9 (5)	2 (7)	7 (5)

Notes: ^aThose who scored in the top half of the scale, considered having high level of CE and those who scored on the lower half were considered having low level of CE.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be a relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and domestic products evaluation. This hypothesis was tested using correlation analysis and yielded significant re-

sults as shown in Table 2. Therefore, hypothesis 1 cannot be rejected which means, there is a relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and domestic products evaluation. The positive relationship suggests that, the more ethnocentric a consumer is, the more positive his/her evaluation towards local products. Four aspects of products which were quality, technological advancement, value for money and reliability had been tested separately (Table 2). Overall, domestic products evaluation was positive as the mean score was 4.30. The sample evaluated every aspects of domestic products positively as suggested by the mean score in Table 3. More than 80 per cent of the samples were highly ethnocentric consumers. Hence, the results were consistent with previous literature in the sense that, highly ethnocentric consumers evaluate domestic products positively.

Table 2
Correlation with CETSCALE

Factors	Correlation
Buying preference (Whether to buy local or imported)	0.359**
<i>Furniture</i>	0.199**
<i>Apparel</i>	0.302**
<i>Car</i>	0.260**
<i>Personal computer</i>	0.209**
<i>Food</i>	0.165*
Domestic products evaluations	0.506**
<i>Quality</i>	0.357**
<i>Technical advancement</i>	0.381**
<i>Reliability</i>	0.444**
<i>Value for money</i>	0.492**

Notes:

* Significant at the 0.05 level

** Significant at the 0.01 level

Hypothesis 2 stated that there would be a relationship between ethnocentric tendencies and buying preferences. This hypothesis was tested using correlation analysis and yielded significant results as shown in Table 2. Therefore, hypothesis 2 cannot be rejected which means, there is a relationship between ethnocentrism tendencies and buying preferences. The positive relationship shows that buying pref-

Table 3
Mean and Standard Deviation for Buying Preferences and
Domestic Product Evaluation

Factors	Mean^a	Std. Dev.
Buying preference (Whether to buy local or imported)	3.73	0.74
<i>Furniture</i>	3.99	0.93
<i>Apparel</i>	3.72	1.13
<i>Car</i>	3.33	1.48
<i>Personal computer</i>	3.05	1.26
<i>Food</i>	4.79	0.72
Domestic product evaluations	4.30	0.87
<i>Quality</i>	4.38	1.01
<i>Technological advancement</i>	4.59	1.05
<i>Reliability</i>	4.24	1.01
<i>Value for money</i>	4.28	1.11

Notes:

^a For buying preferences and the products, larger numbers indicate greater preferences to buy domestic products. For domestic product evaluations, larger numbers indicate more positive evaluation. Both used five ratio scales.

erences for domestic products increase with ethnocentric tendencies. The buying preferences for five types of products had been tested separately and the results appear in Table 2. The overall mean for buying preferences was 3.73 and this suggests that the sample have more tendencies to buy local products. Mean scores for buying preferences for each product (Table 3) explain more on the buying preferences. Obviously, the sample preferred buying local food products ($M = 4.79$). This may be because domestic food products are more safer to consume especially by Muslim consumers (i.e. Muslim consumers make up 60.4% of the 23.3 million Malaysia's population) than imported food products. Most domestic food products have the JAKIM logo printed on the packaging, to certify that it is safe to be consumed by Muslims. In another extreme, the sample rated personal computers ($M = 3.05$) and cars ($M = 3.33$) as the least preferred domestic products but showing no tendencies to buy imported products either. The analysis suggested that the sample did not prefer to buy local cars but evaluated it positively. The positive evaluation on domestic products could be explained by the high level of ethnocentrism among the respondents (i.e. Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Shin, 1993) and the difference between the evaluation and buying preferences might be influenced by tradi-

tional marketing variables such as quality, value and availability of the products (Marcoux *et al.*, 1997).

This fact could be supported by the fact that the national cars PROTON conquer the roads and parkings lot almost every part of Malaysia eventhough the sample responds suggested that Malaysians do not prefer to buy local cars. Other factors that can explain these phenomenon is the sample's affordability. Relatively, national cars are much cheaper than imported cars and they are also much easier to maintain in terms of getting the parts and the after sales services for the national cars compared to imported cars. Clearly, the concept of consumer ethnocentrism applied here. Highly ethnocentric consumers evaluate domestic products positively even if the quality is below that of imports (Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Marcoux *et al.*, 1997; Watson & Wright, 2000). The same explanation can applied for the sample's buying preferences towards personal computers. Anyhow, there is one thing to bear in mind about personal computers. Some of the established foreign brands of personal computers are actually locally made. According to the Ministry of Domestic and Consumers Affairs, the Made in Malaysia product is the product with local content of around twenty to thirty percent. The Malaysian consumers may not be aware of the definition and this may have resulted in biased respond.

Hypothesis 3 states that there would be significant differences regarding ethnocentric tendencies based on age, income and education categories. Chi-Square analysis was used to test this hypothesis for gender, income and education categories. Correlation analysis was used to test the age categories. The results of the test appear in Tables 2 and 4. Hypothesis 3 can be rejected for gender ($\chi^2 = 0.20$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.65$), income ($\chi^2 = 7.12$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.13$), education ($\chi^2 = 2.93$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.57$) and age categories. The results suggest that there are no relationships between ethnocentric tendencies and age, gender, income and education categories. Previous researches have proved that relationship between age, gender, income and education and ethnocentric tendencies were not consistent across countries. There were many cases where only one of these variables had a significant relationship with ethnocentric tendencies. However, this study suggests that none of the variables have a relationship with ethnocentric tendencies. Therefore, age, gender, income and education are not able to explain consumer ethnocentrism in Peninsular Malaysia. Future research should try to explore the factors that determine or influence Malaysians' consumer ethnocentrism. More over, most of the respondents were classified as having high level of consumer ethnocentrism (Table 1).

Table 4
Chi – Square Test Results

Demographic variables	χ^2	df	Significance
Gender	0.20	1	0.65
Education	2.93	4	0.57
Income	7.12	4	0.13

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to provide an insight into consumer ethnocentrism in Peninsular Malaysia. The CETSCALE proved to be applicable and reliable in the Malaysian consumers' context. This study showed that consumer ethnocentrism has an impact on Malaysian consumers' domestic products evaluation and buying preferences for specific products.

The Malaysian sample in this study proved to be highly ethnocentric as they had the tendencies to buy local products. Marketers should consider these facts in formulizing their marketing activities such as product positioning, market development and segmentation. Products should be positioned parallel to the idea that they are made locally. In order to do this, promotion tools such as advertising should carry clear messages that could bring forward the idea that the product is locally manufactured or have been through value-added-activities in the country. For products which are imported, promotion campaigns should avoid mentioning anything on country of origin and stress more on product attributes.

In 1975, rising to the government's call to promote local products and services, FOMCA had initiated and successfully carried out the "Buy Malaysian Campaign". The Malaysian government since then, has lunched the "Buy Malaysian Product" campaign more systematically and holistically. The campaign is one of the government's initiatives to overcome the economic turmoil. In order to make the campaign a success, our made-in-Malaysia products should be of high quality. The campaign draft outlined by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumers Affairs states that at the consumer level, consumers should be educated towards believing that Malaysian products are of compara-

ble standards to imported ones. The findings from this study show that the sample generally rated Malaysian products as positive but they did not show absolute preferences to buy Malaysian products except for food products. Therefore, the relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumers Affairs, should focus on the industry level in producing high quality products to build confidence and create pure intention among consumers to buy domestic products.

In general the study also showed that the Malaysian sample was of highly ethnocentric consumers. Small and medium industries (SMIs) should take advantage of this opportunity to develop and penetrate more markets locally, especially companies involved in food industries. Producers of other products such as cars and personal computers, should strive harder in winning consumers confidence. This can be achieved by enhancing brand equity. At the same time, quality standards of products should also be upgraded through research and development activities and various forms of cooperation with successful companies. SMIs products, which have established brand equity locally, can then enter the international market with more confidence.

As for future research, we can try to explore the factors that can explain consumer ethnocentrism in Malaysia. Other demographic variables such as ethnicity and factors such as openness to culture, dogmatism and lifestyle should be considered. The investigation on Malaysian consumers' products evaluation towards imports and the reason why they do not prefer domestic products should also be explored.

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